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Doctors of Philosophy: David Greig in Dialogue with Vassiliki Kolocotroni and Willy Maley

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VASSILIKI KOLOCOTRONI and WILLY MALEY: Over the past fifty years Spark's fiction has been adapted for film, television and radio, often with considerable success, but *Doctors of Philosophy*, her only full-length stage play, first staged in 1962, has been overlooked. Why do you think this is? How did a play by one of our greatest modern writers get lost?

DAVID GREIG: Theatre is, by its nature, a transient business. A truly great show can be missed by history unless someone sees it and writes about it. In the case of *Drs of Phil.*, although the reviews were mixed to good, no great critic of the day really lent it support and it wasn't enough of a box-office smash to overcome that critical indifference. A play is very reliant on the circumstances of its first production. If it arrives into the world in the wrong production, or at the wrong time, it can languish unnoticed in the archives for decades.

But the truth is, I think *Drs of Phil.* suffered from a twin disadvantage. The first is that it arrived at precisely the wrong moment. In 1956 the English theatre underwent a revolution led by the 'Angry Young Men'. This revolution saw the West End and the French Window play wiped away. This revolution is sometimes compared to punk – a necessary cleansing of decadent material from the national stage... but, as Prof. Dan Rebellato has pointed out in his book *1956 And All That*, you can see that revolution a different way. The West End of the late forties and early fifties was in fact filled with plays that were by women, by homosexuals, by Frenchmen, about philosophy, embracing surrealism and modernism,

exploring the concerns of women... etc. The Angry Young Men, in some senses, tried to reclaim the stages of London for red blooded heterosexual Englishmen. Now, whatever Muriel Spark was, she was not that. So I think this play – philosophical, French, written by a woman, with a West End audience in mind arrived in the wake of a great purging of such work and, as such, maybe never stood a chance.

Also, all plays by women tend to get forgotten more quickly than plays by men. I can't think of a single female historical, or even recent, author for whom that is not the case. Maybe Lorraine Hansbury? Maybe Dorothy Parker? But really from Aphra Behn to Hannah Cowley to Sophie Treadwell somehow, no matter how successful a work is in its day, it will be forgotten until it is rediscovered... and it is only on this 'rediscovery' that it stands a chance of making a name for itself.

VK/WM: Your own play, *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* (2011), explored the Border Ballads through the eyes and ears of a female academic. As a writer who, like Spark, lived in Africa and shares a sense of the poetic possibilities of drama do you feel a special affinity with her?

DG: I came to Spark late. In truth I came to her through *Doctors of Philosophy*. Shamefully I know nothing of her work except the film of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and a number of poems which I liked in collections. I'm not sure what caused this omission in my reading. An enormous failing on my part. But it did give me the luck of discovering Spark at an age and time when I can appreciate her work and giving me the treat of an entire oeuvre open to my exploration. God she's good!

I am not sure that the Africa connection had occurred to me in particular but I do think Spark and I share a sense of being both Scottish and not Scottish at the same time. My

background meant that I never felt I belonged in Edinburgh quite in the way a native born Edinburgher would. But I also know the city intimately and with the same sense of a studied eye that I think Spark brought to both Edinburgh and London.

Also I have always been very drawn to clever women. My mother is a clever woman whom the times and the place of her birth kept from university. Working class Lossiemouth was never going to be a place to produce a Doctor of Philosophy. It was only much later in her life she was able to fully accomplish the potential of her intellect. I think there is something in Spark's outsider/insider approach to academia that appeals to me personally.

VK/WM: Spark was interested in experimental writing, including theatre, and was an admirer of Pirandello. What influences do you see at work in *Doctors of Philosophy*?

DG: You can see clearly the influence of Pirandello, Sartre and Ionesco ... maybe even Beckett. All the Frenchies! Which is to say, all the authors who had wowed London in the fifties but were to be swept aside in 1956. Wilde is also an obvious influence on her dialogue. Interestingly, I also see in the play Spark's possible influence on other writers... or at least ... her drinking from a shared fountain. I see glimpses of Joe Orton, and Tom Stoppard. I also see fragments of Caryl Churchill. There is no doubt she was primarily a novelist and poet but given the right circumstances I think she could have been a playwright of more renown.

VK/WM: *Doctors of Philosophy* was published in the same year that *Dr Who* was launched. There was some debate recently when it was announced that the new *Dr Who* – the thirteenth – would be a woman, Jodie Whittaker, the first female doctor. Do you think Spark's play remains timely in its examination of gender and power?

DG: Oh yes! This play is hilarious and deeply aware of gender and power. I love that all the men are both under-written and called Charlie. It's a play that understands all the knots and unfairnesses that tie clever women in knots in the world. But it's also funny and wise... it's not polemical. That isn't to say she isn't radical. She suggests the whole world is a construct – that none of this is 'real'.

VK/WM: An alternative title was suggested for Spark's play – *Charlie is My Darling*. Does it have any merit?

DG: I didn't know that! I prefer *Doctors of Philosophy* because I think it's a play about clever women and philosophy... but *Charlie Is My Darling* hints at Spark's Scottishness – otherwise ignored in the play – so that is appealing.

VK/WM: The success of one particular novel – adapted to huge acclaim – has meant Spark's other work is overshadowed in the public mind. Spark's centenary offers an opportunity to go 'Beyond *Brodie*', and *Doctors of Philosophy* is a chance to encourage a much wider awareness of her versatility. What are the prospects for a full production and a major tour of this unique work?

DG: Just recently I saw David Harrower's new adaptation of *Jean Brodie* at The Donmar Warehouse. I loved his version. I felt in awe of the underlying Spark text watching it. This story told so often – overtold perhaps – felt fresh again and once more I heard the extraordinary weighting and freighting of her phrasemaking. She wrote dialogue like a playwright – as good as any Scotland has produced.

Doctors of Philosophy is a trickier prospect for production. It's an unknown title. It's not structurally perfect. It's in a style which can be perceived as 'old fashioned'. However, I think it's genuinely hilarious. I think there are five amazing roles for women and I think the play has – buried within it – a truly wonderful production. So... someone will do it eventually! I hope it's my theatre.

VK/WM: *Doctors of Philosophy* has a very thin production history. It was revived in 1964 by Newcastle University Staff Dramatic Society for a 3-night run (24-26 April). Are you aware of any other productions?

DG: No. I know the Swedish production which is, I think erroneously, credited to Ingmar Bergman. But apart from that, no.

VK/WM: Penelope Gilliatt called *Doctors of Philosophy* a 'novelist's play'. Do you think that's a fair assessment?

DG: Well, Spark was a novelist and this is her only stage play. So it's a truthful statement. She also wrote radio plays. But the statement has an underlying thought – a novelist's play is one which doesn't really understand the stage. This is partly true. I would say it's a debut play. It has many of the flaws and many of the joys of a debut play. I wish she had written more for the stage but she didn't.

VK/WM: 'CHARLIE: An audience, she says, eyes upon her. The next thing she'll be saying we're on stage.'

How funny is the play? Do you agree with the *New York Times* account of Spark as ‘one of this century’s finest creators of comic-metaphysical entertainment’?

DG: Yes yes yes! When we worked on the show in the rehearsal room it was laugh out loud funny on page after page. I think the humour has survived very well. Sadly, so have the issues she is satirising.

VK/WM: ‘LEONORA: Reality is very alarming at first and then it becomes interesting. Are you interested in the nature of reality, Mrs S.?’

MRS S.: Very, I’m trying to give it a polish as you can see.’

How do you approach Mrs. S. in the play? What do you think of Spark’s treatment of class, if ‘treatment’ is the right word?

DG: Well, it’s certainly a characterisation where a foot can be wrongly placed. I think the key is to remember that Spark herself was poor in London. She was not university educated. I think Spark’s characterisation of Mrs S... (could that S be for Spark?) is as her own voice in the proceedings. One thing that always annoys me about the British theatre is how rarely working class characters are allowed to be clever, to be witty, to be philosophical. Whenever they are, people say ‘oh, that’s not true to life. Mrs S. isn’t real.’ I think she is who she is – a clever woman whose job is to clean – who sees the nature of reality. That makes her exciting!